

## The Frontier 1979-1980 Exhibition programmed by Media Study/Buffalo Introduction by Dr. Gerald O'Grady

By distinguishing between “fact” and “symbol” I mean to designate two separate modes of existence: one has a specific location in time and space; the other, its place in the mind, or in the collective imagination of Americans.

--Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition, 1979, p. ix.

The fact of *The Frontier* is that it is a series of 16 programs including the work of 30 Independent film and video makers from the regions of Buffalo and Western New York State and Toronto and Southern Ontario in Canada, produced by Media Study/Buffalo and aired by WNED-TV Channel 17 to its audience in those signal areas depicted on the cover of this tabloid. On page four, Lynn Corcoran, the Producer of *The Frontier*, describes her work in selecting and assembling the programs.

*The Frontier* draws its name from the physical location of Canada and the United States on the Niagara Frontier. It also indicates a collaboration between arts funding sources in the two countries. The publication of this tabloid has been made possible by a grant from The Canada Council/Conseil des Arts du Canada to The Toronto Super-Eight Film Festival which is distributing it in Canada. The programs themselves were made possible through general support from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts to Media Study/Buffalo, more than matched by funds from the general membership of WNED, Channel 17.

The symbol of *The Frontier* is that it presents a creative interface between a regional media center, Media Study/Buffalo, and a public television station, WNED TV Channel 17 and allows a border to be crossed between independent makers of the moving image and public broadcasting, a kind of peace bridge between two groups which have been engaging in recriminations and communications over the past decade. The construction of this bridge involved 1) a series of catalytic activities by independent film and video makers, their supporters, and a variety of funding agencies to explore, define and publicize their problems; 2) the creation of new institutions to help solve the problems; 3) the changing of federal laws; and 4) the continuation of professional meetings and organizational development.

### **Catalytic Activities**

In 1972, Sheldon Renan, the Director of Pacific Film Archives, undertook a study on *The Economics of Independent Filmmaking* for the Public Media Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, then headed by Chloe Aaron, now Vice President for Programming of the Public Broadcasting Service. Willard Van Dyke, then Director of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and John Hanhardt, who is now Curator of the Film and Video Department of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York were doing a similar study for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting at the urging of David Stewart, a long-time advocate for independent filmmakers there. I had undertaken a “Study of the Distribution of Short Films by Independent Filmmakers” and sent a 36-question form to over a thousand makers. The responses confirmed Renan’s report which indicated that 89% of the filmmakers did not recoup production costs from film income and 96% of his respondents reported that they could not support themselves on the income generated by their films. Few had any access to public television. In February, 1973, the National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation and the John and Mary Markle Foundation. Supported a Conference of Regional Development of Film Centers and Services at Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York. At that

conference, ten of us were appointed to a Committee on Film and Television Resources and Services which, with the support of the same private foundations and public agency, held meetings throughout the United States for the next three years, and produced *The Independent Film Community: A Report on the Status of Independent Film in the United States* (1977). The Markle Foundation supported another study, *The Independent Filmmaker In the Kinevisual Age*, performed by the H.W. Land Corporation for the Center for Understanding Media in New York. At the same time, I became involved with Van Dyke, Douglas Davis, a writer and independent video maker, and Fred Barzyk, a producer for WGBH in Boston, in directing "Open Circuits: The First International Conference on the Future of Television" at the Museum of Modern Art (1974), the proceedings of which were published in *The New Television: A Public/Private Art* by the MIT Press (1977). The problem of independent videomakers was a primary topic at this conference and produced essays by Gerd Stern, "Support of Television Art by Public Funding," and by Howard Klein and Russell Connor.

The Public Media Program of the National Endowment for the Arts responded to the problem by establishing four new programs: (1) the direct funding of independent film and videomakers, an innovation reported on in Michael Straight's recent book, *Twigs for an Eagle's Nest: Government and the Arts: 1965-1978* (1979); (2) the funding of independents through grants of up to \$50,000 in matching funds to other non-profit institutions; (3) funding to place independents as interns in cable television companies through George Stoney's Alternate Media Center at New York University; and (4) funding directly to public television stations which were willing to have independents come as artists in residence to produce works of their own choice. The New York State Council on the Arts which, by its legislation, cannot directly fund individuals, established a similar program with public television stations and, more recently, a new program to fund independents through non-profit institutions which were willing to take the responsibility for co-producing the individual works and to provide administrative services, resources, and assistance for distribution. Both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the New York Council on the Humanities became increasingly sensitive to the problem of supporting independents. The Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts created the Independent Documentary Fund at WNET-Channel 13 in New York in 1977 and in 1980 the Rockefeller Foundation announced a new category of support to independent videomakers. It already had a long history of support of video art at the National Center for Experiments in Television at KQED in San Francisco, The New Television Workshop at WGBH in Boston, and The Television Laboratory at WNET In New York.

### **Creation of New Institutions**

An important link in assisting independent film and video makers to gain access to production equipment and to distribution and transmission was the foundation of regional media centers. This movement is documented in Hollis Melton, *A Guide to Independent Film and Video* (1976) and Nancy Legge, *Access: Film and Video Equipment. A Directory* (1978). Media Study/Buffalo, for example, provides access to production equipment, workshops in image/sound experimentation and production, and administration of projects by independent image and sound artists. During the past decade, it has engaged in a number of collaborations with WNED-TV Channel 17 through J. Michael Collins, President and General Manager, John Hutchinson, Program Director, and Executive Producer Wiley Hance. Media Study/Buffalo and Channel 17 provided equipment for artist Ed Emshwiller to be in residence in Buffalo on a New York State Council on the Arts grant to produce an experimental work, *POSITIVE NEGATIVE ELECTRONIC FACES* (1973). In 1975, the station invited me to interview and show the works of thirteen independents in a series called *FILM-MAKERS*, and those programs featuring James Blue, Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Ed Emshwiller, David Hancock, Hilary Harris, Peter Kubelka, Richard Leacock, Jonas Mekas, Gunvor Nelson, Donn Pennebaker, Paul Sharits and Stan Vanderbeek have since been aired on public television in various American cities. In 1978, Channel 17 received a grant

from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Arts to support the production and showing of six half-hour works by Steina and Woody Vasulka of Buffalo. At the same time, KUHT-TV Channel 8 in Houston, Texas, received a similar grant to support James Blue, and he used part of his funding to produce a series of programs, *The Territory*, which featured independent makers from the Southwest and was produced for KUHT-TV through collaboration with another regional center, the South West Alternate Media Project. When Blue moved to Buffalo, *The Territory* became the model for *The Frontier*.

On its own account, Media Study/Buffalo had served as a conduit and as co-producer for works by Donn Alan Pennebaker (National Endowment for the Arts), Hollis Frampton, Thom Andersen and David Held (New York State Council on the Arts), Tom Johnson and Lance Bird (National Endowment for the Humanities) - for the \$200,000 production of *America Lost and Found* which will be aired nationally on public television through WNET-Channel 13 New York on April 18, 1980 - and (New York Council on the Humanities) - for the production of *The World of Tomorrow*, a documentary on the New York World's Fair, 1939.

### **Changing the Legislation**

It remained to bring about a change in legislation involving the funding of the independent field. The Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, a membership organization to further the interests of these producers was founded in 1974 with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. The AIVF became a rallying point for those engaged in seeking a hearing from committees studying changes in public television. It had organized a National Task Force on Public Broadcasting and on September 7-9, 1977 presented testimony to The Subcommittee on Communications, House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. On January 25, 1978, its members received a special hearing from The Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting in a meeting held at Columbia University. They presented the results of a nationwide survey on independently produced films and videotapes broadcast over public television:

- 35% of the independents whose work was broadcast received no payment from the station.
- 31 % recovered between 1 % and 10% of their production costs.
- 12% recovered between 10% and 25% of their production costs.
- 10% recovered between 25% and 50% of their production costs.
- 12% recovered between 50% and 100% of their production costs.

Many Independents, in computing production costs, did not include the value of their own time and labor.

John Reilly, an independent documentary producer and the Director of Global Village, another regional media center in New York City, undertook a long-term project, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, the Rockefeller Foundation and the SONY Corporation of America, to visit over twenty American cities to gather independent makers at local television stations to discuss the possibilities of collaboration in program production and to introduce new information about developing video technologies. He extended this work to hold conferences on The Independent Producer and Public Television in major American cities, including New York at The Museum of Modern Art in March, 1978. After that meeting, John O'Connor wrote in the *New York Times* (March 26, 1978): "The independents have, in a very real sense, been subsidizing the public TV system." With the support of The Rockefeller Foundation, and the collaboration of Howard Klein, Director of its Arts Program, and Herbert Dordick of the University of Southern California, then visiting the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Reilly organized Independent Television Makers and Public Communications Policy, a Seminar Conference to Promote Telecommunications Diversity in the 1980's, at the Rockefeller Foundation on June 6-9, 1979. Reilly himself presented a paper on "The Independents, Media Arts

Centers and Public Television'; Alan Jacobs, Executive Director of AIVF, contributed "The Independent Mandate"; and Nick DeMartino, an independent producer and editor of Televisions which had published a special issue on "Independent Producers In the Future of Public Television" (Volume 6, No. 4 April 1979), and more recently a Consultant to the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting, addressed "The Case for a Center for Independent Television."

By then the Public Telecommunications Financing Act of 1978 had expressed the clear intention of Congress that the Corporation of Public Broadcasting give special consideration to independent producers, and it was the problems of interpretation and implementation which remained. By December, 1979, the Corporation established a new position, Director of the Television Program Fund, and appointed Lewis Freedman, a person with broad experience in independent, public and commercial broadcast production.

### **Professional Meetings and Organizational Growth**

Other supportive activities continued. Barbara Van Dyke, Executive Director of International Film Seminars is preparing to hold her tenth Arden House Seminar in June, 1980 to bring together independent filmmakers and leaders in public television programming. This effort has been continually supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. She has also organized the first American meeting of INPUT, the International Public Television Screening Conference, in Washington, D.C. on March 23-29, 1980, under the auspices of The Rockefeller Foundation. Media Study/Buffalo, in collaboration with WNED-TV, Channel 17 and the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York at Buffalo, had held its first Conference on Contemporary Directions in the Public Affairs Documentary in February, 1979 and has announced the second annual event for May 12-15, 1980. The Rockefeller Foundation and the NEA funded a National Conference on Media Arts Centers at Lake Minnewaska, New York on April 25-27, 1979, and a second one is planned to take place at The Rocky Mountain Film Center in Boulder, Colorado in the spring of 1980. Directors of forty-seven film and video organizations were represented at the first meeting; by then these regional art centers were providing equipment access to nearly 8000 persons and were assisting in broadcasting programs seen in 2,000,000 homes. On December 10-12, 1979 at one of John Reilly's continuing conferences, "The Independent Producer, Public Television, and New Video Technologies", held at The Walnut Street Theatre, a regional media center in Philadelphia, Brian O'Doherty, Director of the Media Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, announced that funds were being directed to regional organizations such as the Alabama Filmmakers Coop and the South West Alternate Media Project, to be distributed to independent makers in those areas. He stated that "the biggest supporter of any art in this country is the artist; not the federal government, not the private sector," added that the problem of the independent film and video makers was still based on the fact that they "do not have the kinds of support systems that they do in the visual arts, in music, in theater, or in dance", and pledged the Endowment's continuing assistance in "productively relating independent to public television stations – in ways that they both win." The Black Filmmakers Foundation, headed by filmmaker Warrington Hudlin will hold its first national conference for black independents in the summer of 1980.

The Independent Film Project, supported by The Ford Foundation held its first Film Market at the New York Film Festival in September, 1979 and Joy Pereth as the Project's Director in January, 1980. This is a national trade association of independents and will serve as a liaison with commercial and non-commercial distributors, cable television buyers, syndicates, videodisc buyers and foreign tv buyers. On another front, the John and Mary Markle Foundation has supported the establishment of Audio Independents to serve independent producers for radio, and George Gelles has been appointed its Executive Director.

## Transformation

The advent of linkages between satellites, the parabolic disc antennas known as earth stations, and cable-television transmission centers are opening the way to a variety of new networks, enlarging the scope of television with a multitude of channels, and videodiscs and home playback machines now promise low-cost national distribution of programming. Cable companies will no longer be “balkanized” and independents will no longer be aliens in their own land. In “The American Myth: Paradise (To Be) Regained” (PMLA 74, 1959), Frederic I. Carpenter tracked Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier concept through the history of American literature and reported that “even after the physical frontier disappeared the pattern continued.” John F. Kennedy knew this well when he went to Independence Hall in Philadelphia on July 4, 1962 to deliver a speech on American interdependence in a global society. His “New Frontier” psychologized an old concept and located the cutting edge on the moon, in the urban ghetto, and wherever else new challenges arose. In the early 1980’s, we are witnessing the transformation of boundaries between makers and stations into new bridges. Issues that existed on the symbolic frontier have become facts, and issues arising from the facts of a new technology are becoming the new symbolic frontiers.